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Continuities and discontinuities in family foster care: An introduction

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Abstract

Current research and observations indicate that complex processes are involved in dealing with stability and instability in family foster care. Disruptions, separations and transitions have great implications for foster children's lives, and also for the daily practice of foster families, birth parents and social workers. Against this background, the ninth International Foster Care Research Network Conference was held in September 2017 in Paris (France) on the theme 'Continuity and disruption in foster care'. A selection of the presentations there were rewritten into a paper as part of this special issue.

Keywords: family foster care, child-carer relationship, breakdown

Introduction

Of the various interventions available to Child Protection Services (CPS), family foster care is more prominently associated with the idea of a relatively stable situation, primarily for young children, than other types of placement. However, during their life course, foster children can still experience disruptions, such as changes in household, which are unanimously considered as threatening to their productive development and future adulthood. A study by Sinclair and colleagues (2005, p. 131) in the UK, for example, reports a disruption rate of 29 percent in a basic sample of almost 600 children in foster care aged 0-18 years over the course of three years. The percentage found in a sample of more than 400 foster children aged 0-18 years in the Netherlands was comparable: 31.7 percent of the placements broke down over the course of three years and four months (Strijker, 2010, p. 90). The risk of a breakdown is higher in the adolescent age group. Van Ooijen (2012, p. 36), for example, observed a disruption rate of 45.7 percent over the course of 18 months in a sample of 92 adolescent foster children aged 11-18. Similar outcomes have been found in the US (see, for example, Wulczyn & Chen, 2010, p. 65).

Current research and observations point out that complex processes are involved in dealing with stability and instability, especially in family foster care. Indeed, discontinuities during a child's life can, for instance, be related to the links with the biological parents, siblings or the extended family, as well as to the child's experience of school or the socio-educational, health-related or psychological support provided by professionals. In the context of family foster care, these processes and experiences are also associated with a number of points to be worked on from the beginning of a foster care intervention, such as the matching of the child and foster family, including the careful preparation of the placement, and above all the consideration of the needs of the child (Grietens, 2011; Steenbakkens, Van der Steen, & Grietens, 2017; Zeijlmans, López, Grietens, & Knorth, 2017). The issue of the contact with and role of the birth parents is crucial during care, especially when there is the prospect of reunification (Vischer, Grietens, Knorth, & Mulder, 2017). As a child grows and reaches majority, there are also specific questions and concerns to be addressed with regard to the transition to adulthood (Stein & Munro, 2008). The disruptions, separations and transitions mentioned above have great implications for a child's life, and also for the daily practice of foster families, birth parents, and social workers (cf. Bastiaensen, 2001).

Against this background the research group 'Éducation Familiale et Interventions Sociales en Direction des Familles' of the Centre de Recherches en Éducation et Formation (CREF) at

the University Paris Nanterre (France) decided in cooperation with the International Foster Care Research Network coordinated by the University of Siegen (Germany) to organise the ninth IFCRN Conference on the theme ‘Continuity and disruption in foster care’. The Conference was held from 27 to 29 September 2017. A selection of the presentations were rewritten into a paper as part of this special issue.

Contributions

Three papers focus on one of the most critical factors in the fostering process and the risk of discontinuation (cf. Sinclair, 2005, p. 125): the relationship between the foster child and the main carer, i.e. the assessment of this, including the carer’s attitude regarding any special needs the child presents. The next two papers reconstruct the processes and experiences connected with discontinuation of a placement: one following placement breakdown, the other caused by the ‘aging out’ phenomenon where young people transition to adulthood. The final paper presents a bird’s eye view of social pedagogical research on breakdown processes in family foster care. We will now take a closer look.

The child and carer relating to each other; a critical factor

Johan Strijker and *Erik Knorth* (University of Groningen, Netherlands) report on research regarding the willingness of foster carers to raise children with special needs. Based on interviews with prospective foster carers (N=37), the authors discuss the discrepancy between the children who enter family foster care and their needs and limitations on the one hand, and the wishes, ideas and conceptions of the carers on the other hand. They raise the question of how foster carers and matching processes can be better moderated to avoid discontinuity and breakdown of foster placements.

Teresa Díaz-Tártalo and *Nuria Fuentes-Peláez* (University of Barcelona, Spain) present a study which works with several methods, including a creative route to access (the Double Moon test), to study the relationships of children in foster care with their biological families and foster carers (26 children; 39 foster parents). The study shows how the attitudes of foster parents towards the biological parents influence children’s relationships with their biological families as well as the relationships with the foster families. The colleagues discuss the implications of their findings for practice.

Séverine Euillet, *Myriam Kettani* and *Hélène Join-Lambert* (University of Paris Nanterre, France) write about a longitudinal study analysing the evolution of the quality of attachment

in children placed in foster homes. Initially, 36 children aged an average of 52 months were presented with the Attachment Story Completion Task. Six years later, 22 children from the initial group were asked to complete the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment and the Adolescent Unresolved Attachment Questionnaire. The results show that these children develop a calm emotional relationship with caregivers after six years of fostering, but still have feelings of fear and anger with respect to the attachment relationship with their birth parents, confirming that there may be at least two types of attachment. In addition, the pernicious consequences of changing foster homes on the development of the child were reasserted.

Processes and experiences linked to discontinuation of foster care

Clara Bombach, Thomas Gabriel, Renate Stohler and Karin Werner (Zürich University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland) tackle the issue of the breakdown process during foster care placements through a qualitative study. The originality and value of their work is that the data collected (by way of semi-structured interviews) represent the perspective of those who have directly experienced a breakdown: foster parents (N=20) and foster children (N=13). The main aim is to identify factors which lead to the discontinuation of the placement. No single factor could be isolated, but different constellations of conditions were identified, leading to a better understanding of the processes concerned. What is common, however, is that all the children interviewed share the sense of no longer belonging to the foster family from a certain moment. The findings comprise new insights which could be employed by foster care workers.

Anna-Marie Herdtle (University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg) explores identity formation processes in young people leaving their foster families through qualitative research. She conducted semi-structured interviews with young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood. The reconstruction demonstrates the particular place held by subjective experiences related to continuity events or breaks in their care paths (such as changes in foster home or school). These experiences were expressed particularly at the time of the transition to adulthood, where the young adult has to make decisions. The interviews also show how they cope with the demands emerging during their transition to adulthood. The author particularly emphasizes the relational dimension between the young people and the adults around them, more or less perceived as resources during this transition phase.

In the final paper, after introducing the main characteristics of social pedagogical research, *Klaus Wolf* (University of Siegen, Germany) presents a model of interdependency which

permits analysis of the phenomenon of a placement breakdown in foster care, not so much as the result of isolated cause-and-effect relationships, but as the outcome of a network of factors which influence each other. Using a four-level approach (including consideration of legal codes, household status, contacts and relationships, and family membership and belonging), Wolf illustrates the richness of the model with a number of cases, thereby showing that ‘a breakdown’ can take many different forms depending on how the four levels ‘interact’.

Finally

Issues such as evaluating foster carers’ willingness to raise children with special needs, nurturing the relationships between foster children and their birth parents, monitoring the development of the children’s attachment relationships, dealing with children’s sense of no longer belonging to a foster family, providing relational support for adolescents transitioning to independence, and being sensitive to the diversity of placement breakdown processes are topics which are a nearly constant feature of the work, primarily of social workers: the professionals responsible for supervising and supporting foster placements. Research by Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs (2005, p. 197-198) demonstrates how important their role is in counselling foster carers. Carers indicated characteristics such as ‘being there for them’, ‘being reliable and prompt’, ‘being respectful of the carer’s views’, ‘being considerate’ and ‘being supportive’ as being pivotal for good working relationships. Given the high risk of placement breakdown, the authors argue that the support provided by social workers is key, but at the same time not always enough to prevent processes that end up with the discontinuation of a child’s stay with a foster family. At this point the research suggests “[...] that more specific interventions targeted at *carer skills* can be effective [...]; generalised support on its own is not enough” (Sinclair et al., 2005b, p. 206 – our italics). This message is consistent with the main findings presented in this special issue.

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